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Book Reviews

Alex Jeffries, *Doors of Al Ain* (Dubai, Motivate Publishing, 2013); pp. 112; paperback; 130 colour illustrations; ISBN 978-1-86063-346-1.

This beautiful illustrated volume is a photographic catalogue of the traditional Arab doors of of Al Ain, often called the 'garden city' and the second largest city in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. Al Ain is an archaeologically significant site that has tombs over four thousand years old in the Hili Fort area, and was once an important stop on the overland route from the Emirates to Oman. Alex Jeffries opens with a consideration of the Arabic word *bab* (door), itself an invitation to enter his text, which catalogues in detail the 'rich history in the city's doorways' as he fears 'that in the next few years these old buildings and features … may one day be gone' (p. 9). Urban development in Al Ain has been very slow compared to the rapid urbanisation of Dubai, for example, but there are signs that this is likely to change, with the announcement of the construction of a vast mosque by His Highness Shaikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan Masjid in 2014.

Jeffries explains the door as the boundary between the outside world and the '*hurma* [the] sanctity of a place of dwelling' (p. 13). The doors he photographed are often shabby and battered, in poor condition and protecting older, humble houses and businesses, but they are united by the brilliance of the colours in which they are painted, and by the creativity of the designs. The Western custom of painting a door a single, block colour finds no place in the riotous profusion of individual and highly original patterns, metalwork and locks, bas-relief and stencil designs, among other modes of ornamentation. Al Ain is the first Emirati site to be given UNESCO World Heritage status, and the charm of the city is clearly apparent in Jeffries' loving portraits (an appropriate term, as the pictures are akin to studies of human individuals, as each door is full of character and charm) of its doors.

For all their protective role, he notes that doors in Al Ain very often are open, and invite passers-by to glimpse the life going on indoors. This is especially true of the doors to public buildings such as *souks* (markets) with mini-*majis* (chairs), on which people sit and 'chat over a cup of *gahwa*, the traditional Arabic coffee' (p. 32). Jeffries explains the

symbolism of colours, pattern elements such as the star, crescent, and flower motifs, and the use of Arabic script. Green is especially evident in the images, and Jeffries reminds the reader that the *Qur'an* (*sura* 76:21) states that 'the inhabitants of paradise will wear green garments of fine silk' (p. 68). Jeffries' book is a remarkable evocation of the beauties of Al Ain, a place that this reader has been privileged to visit, and a monument to its past, whatever the future may hold. This beautiful book deserves a wide readership and (to coin a term) viewership, and Alex Jeffries is to be congratulated on the achievement embodied in *The Doors of Al Ain*.

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Duncan Lunan, *The Stones and the Stars: Building Scotland's Newest Megalith* (New York, Springer, 2013); pp. xix + 325; paperback; 176 illustrations; ISBN 978-1-4614-5354-3.

The enduring attraction of megalithic monuments is widely accepted but under-theorised. The British Isles is peculiarly rich in constructions from the Neolithic era (which begins around 4,000 BC but with substantial material remains from 3,500 BC), including stone circles, chambered tombs, dolmens, and processional avenues. The story of academic archaeology throughout the twentieth century has proposed interpretations of these structures that make them either religious or astronomical. The latter explanation is supported by the alignment of many Neolithic buildings with the sunrise or sunset on the midsummer or midwinter solstice, and by others with the equinoxes. In the twenty-first century astronomy is readily acknowledged, although the more elaborate hypotheses of Alexander Thom and Gerald Hawkins have somewhat faded from view.

The second part of the question of the aesthetic appeal of Neolithic monuments is the modern habit of erecting new 'takes' on them, which include extraordinary structures such as Carhenge, situated just north of Alliance, Nebraska, made (as the name indicates) of cars. More whimsical is Jeremy Deller's playful artwork, 'Sacrilege', which re-images Stonehenge as a bouncy castle, and has been erected on sites around the world. Traditionalist examples include the Australian Standing Stones, a

circle erected in 1992 in Glen Innes, New South Wales, based on the Ring of Brodgar in the Orkneys, and the Georgia Guidestones, a granite astronomical observatory erected in 1979 near Elberton, Georgia, in the United States of America. Yet again, the question of why humans feel compelled to replicate the remarkable structures of the Neolithic in the modern world has rarely, if ever, been addressed.

Duncan Lunan's *The Stones and the Stars* does give clear reasons for the creation of one particular modern astronomically accurate stone circle, at Sighthill Park in Glasgow. Scotland is rich in archaeological remains, and there are approximately fifty identified prehistoric stone circles. Lunan was manager of a job creation scheme, the Glasgow Parks Department Astronomy Project, which ran from March 1978 to December 1979 and was funded by Jim Callaghan's Labour government. The project mounted an exhibition, 'The High Frontier, A Decade of Space Research, 1969-1979', which toured the United Kingdom and was seen by 86,000 people. The enduring legacy of this project was the Sighthill stone circle, which in 2014 has become the subject of protests by notable cultural figures in Glasgow when the urban regeneration of the area led to a proposal that the circle be destroyed.

Lunan's book, which is lavishly illustrated, tells a very personal story of his friendships with the astro-archaeologists Alexander Thom and his son Archie, and the second half, 'A Stone Circle For Glasgow', is a kind of detective story and thriller combined. Lunan and his colleagues checked each of the eighteen proposed sites in Glasgow, and a decision was made that Sighthill Park fitted the project's needs most closely. The quest then shifted to the best source for the stones of the circle, with Beltmoss quarry in Kilsyth the eventual winner, and to how to lift the stones into position, as one stone had snapped during the journey to Glasgow in a dump-truck. Chapter 7, 'Operation Megalithic Lift', is thrilling, as the Ministry of Defence became involved, and a naval ground crew and helicopter assisted with siting the stones. By that stage, coverage in Scottish and British newspapers fuelled the negative perceptions of the new Tory Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, who was elected in May 1979, and her government in Westminster. The midsummer solstice of June 1979 was the first event that tested the new circle, and Chapter 8, 'Events On Site', chronicles astronomical phenomena observed at Sighthill. The final monument comprised sixteen stones in a ring and a central, very large stone.

The proposal to dismantle the Sighthill circle that emerged in the context of demolition of outmoded housing estates in northern Glasgow is problematic, not just because of the money and effort, expertise, and love that went into erecting the stones. Sighthill has, like many modern imitations of Neolithic monuments, become sacred ground for contemporary Pagans who conduct rituals there, and is important for non-religious reasons to others who have lived and worked, strolled and cycled in the area of Sighthill Park. It seems that the stones will be re-located when the wrecking ball moves in early in 2015. Lunan's marvellous book, a labour of love and a deeply provocative and interesting account of one particular modern stone circle, is an important piece of research in the quest to identify the particular aesthetic appeal of northern European Neolithic architecture. It is deserving of a wide readership, and the Sighthill circle is deserving of a future. It is hoped that both will get their just deserts.

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Helen Morales, *Classical Mythology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2007); pp. xiv + 143; paperback; 24 black and white figures; ISBN 978-0-19-280476-1.

The Oxford University Press series of 'Very Short Introductions' are attractive for a number of reasons, not least because they are brief, addressed to the general reader, and inexpensive. Helen Morales' foray into Greek and Roman mythology investigates three dimensions of myth; 'lore, ideology, and pleasure' (p. 2). She focuses on the ways that classical mythology continues to be an active force in contemporary culture. Chapter 1, 'Without Bulls There Would Be No Europe', opens with a comparison of a 2 euro coin minted in 2002 and a third century Roman coin from Sidon. Both feature an image of Europa riding Zeus in the form of a bull. Morales identifies this usage as a 'myth of ancestry' (p. 9) and notes that in antiquity Europa was identified with Phoenicia, and that in fact it is the region 'Europe' that derives it name from Europa's having been abducted by Zeus and deserted in that land. She cites Horace's (first century BC) ode in which Europa is comforted by the goddess Venus, and interestingly links Europa's Middle Eastern ancestry with the controversial thesis of Martin

Bernal, whose *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (1987) challenged the 'Europeanness' of Classics and Ancient History as disciplines, pointing out their implicitly racist and *sui generis* presuppositions.

From this beginning, Morales considers Wolfgang Peterson's film *Troy* (2004), which was not a box-office success, and argues that the changes that Peterson made to the plot detail of the *Iliad* align him with the Greek dramatist Euripides, whose plays never reproduced the 'official' version of a myth, but rather crafted new versions; for example, his '*Medea* has given us the most popular account of the story in which Medea is betrayed by the hero Jason and kills their children in revenge …[but] previous versions had Medea protect her children' (p. 23). She challenges the customary preference for the Greek versions of myths over Roman interpretations, and links the cults of the various deities to archaeological sites in Rome, through which something of the 'lived religion' of the people can be recovered. Chapter 3, 'Gods and Heroes', covers the association of the gods with the rich and famous (for example, the Emperor depicted in sculpture as Heracles and Mrs Anthony Eden depicted in photography as Clio, the Muse of History), and ponders what qualities were necessary for a mortal man to be regarded as a hero? Morales concludes that 'heroes of classical mythology were figures from the *past* … what made them heroes, their *mythism*, if you like, always came from their importance to the present' (p. 55).

Chapter 5, 'On The Analyst's Couch', interrogates the use of the myth of Oedipus by the celebrated psychoanalyst, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), who employed it to assert that 'the mythic narrative preserved the memory of a real parricide and incest that took place when mankind was in its infancy' (pp. 71-73), and further to hang a whole theory of human psychology and development on it, due to its power and resonation in his own life. As Morales puts it, 'he moves from his own experiences and emotions to making a general claim about the human (or, rather, male) condition' (p. 73). Chapter 6, 'The Sexual Politics of Myth', provides a counterpoint to Freud, focused as it is on the frequency of male deities raping human women (Zeus and Europa, Mars and Rhea Silvia, Romulus and Remus and the Sabine women, Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, and so on). From this unpromising start Morales considers the popularity of lesbian desire in the television series *Xena: Warrior Princess*, in which Xena (Lucy Lawless) and Gabrielle (Renee O'Connor), 'kiss … [and] Xena

commissions a poem from Sappho … as a gift to Gabrielle' (p. 94). This popular cultural manifestation of the re-writing of classical myth is then linked to the intellectual projects of women as diverse as Christine de Pizan (1364-1430) and Luce Irigaray (b. 1932).

Chapter 7, 'Mythology, Spirituality, and the New Age', concludes this successful small volume with ruminations on astrology, the 'goddess within', and corporeal goddesses such as the performance artist Betsy Damon (who incarnated the Great Goddess New York in the 1970s, and Diana, Princess of Wales (1961-1997) whose early death provoked a public outpouring of grief. The enduring influence of Robert Graves' eccentric *The White Goddess* (1948) is also touched upon. In conclusion, this is a highly appealing volume that deserves a wide readership. It is strongly recommended.

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Tim Dowley, editor, *Introduction to the History of Christianity*, second edition (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2013); pp. 616; ISBN: 978-0-8006-9969-7.

Over multiple chapters compiled into eight parts, *Introduction to the History of Christianity* aims to present an objective history of the faith, despite its largely being written by Christians (p. 18). Given the importance of the origins of the faith, I focus this review on 'Part 1: Beginnings AD 1-325'. The objectivity of this book is immediately called into question when the first page proper refers to Christianity's Roman presence 'within fifteen years of the resurrection of Christ' (p. 23). The possibility of Jesus' non-existence is quickly raised and dismissed with the fallacious claim that 'No serious historian really doubts that Jesus actually lived' (p. 24). The usual sources are then trotted out, with no critical discussion or comparative analysis. As is typical in the field, hypothetical sources underlying the Gospels are purported, with no thought given as to how reliable these non-existing sources may have been (pp. 28-30). The author – Richard Burridge – even indicates that 'some people' examine the Gospels with naturalistic assumptions, and that if we would simply 'accept and believe in Jesus as the Son of God who was raised from the dead, then it should not be

surprising that he could do extraordinary things' (p. 31). *Touché*. The all-important first chapter concludes that historians need to explain why the disciples changed and why Christianity 'did not die out like the others', just stopping short of claiming that the resurrection accounts are veridical (p. 34).

The rest of 'Part 1' continues to betray the non-objective nature of the book. With no mention of the great uncertainties surrounding Christianity's origin/s that specialist scholars wrestle with, the Biblical account is effectively summarised and presented as a truthful historical hypothesis, seemingly influenced by the assertion that the non-Christian world 'was as morally corrupt as it has ever been' (p. 46). Indeed, it was the righteous Christian apostles who 'performed many miracles during their evangelistic work' (p. 62). Irenaeus bizarrely seems to be appealed to as an authority concerning the number of Gospels to include in the Canon, though his reasoning that there are four principal winds is wisely (or deceitfully) omitted (p. 74). In a rare show of genuine criticism, it is noted that Eusebius may not be the most trustworthy of historians, partly due to his acceptance of 'most of his sources at face value' (p. 75); much like the authors of this book. To the editor's credit, there is some mention of the fact that most Biblical manuscripts date centuries after Jesus' alleged life, have often been carelessly copied, and many have even been deliberately tampered with (p. 99).

'Part 2' (covering the years CE 325-600) discusses the many early schisms in 'the church', and seems slightly more neutral in acknowledging that much of what is considered Christian today actually stems from 'paganism' (p. 106). This may simply display preference for a certain (i.e. 'purer') stream of Christianity, however, with a later section considering syncretistic Christian religions as problematic (p. 571). Furthermore, speculating on immorality as a cause of Rome's fall – hastened by the Church 'discouraging good Christians from holding public office' – seems unprofessional, as does the statement that at least 'the fall of the Western Empire was offset in the long run by the conversion of the barbarians of Western Europe to Christianity' (pp. 165-166). 'Part 3' largely concerns the Middle Ages and commendably displays some scepticism regarding Anselm's and Aquinas' arguments for God's existence (pp. 244, 250). This is offset somewhat, after a decent discussion of the Reformation in 'Part 4', by some surprising comments in 'Part 5', which heavily focuses on reason and rationalism. It seems to be ever so casually claimed that Descartes had

proved God's existence, as had Leibniz, while Spinoza's musings on a pantheistic god are portrayed as merely being his beliefs, which were roundly discredited (pp. 409-411). The brief critique of Gotthold Lessing's pluralism also seems to indicate an exclusivist agenda (pp. 415-416). While the section on Hume predictably hints that miracles are possible, it is rightly noted that the various philosophical arguments do not necessarily point to the one god, and that much more work needs to be done to show that such a god would be the Christian one (pp. 412-413).

'Part 6' outlines developments to the start of World War I, while 'Part 7' primarily deals with Christianity in the twentieth century, whilst acknowledging Christians' influence on and support of various fascist groups such as the Nazis. The discourse on Biblical scholarship failed to highlight the merits of naturalistic approaches, overlooked recent developments in archaeology that contradict much of the Biblical account, and generally praised the work of conservative scholars whilst simultaneously denigrating the 'excessive skepticism' of more secular academics (pp. 530-545). The final part of the book discusses the present and future of the Christian faith, noting that it now greatly relies on the developing world, and hints at a sort of reverse colonialism (p. 582). The book ends with an unscholarly appeal to the people of the world to embrace Christianity, so as to positively address the 'threatened creation' (p. p. 589), with no mention of how theistic religions can encourage environmental exploitation, or how pantheistic and Pagan religions could foster respect for all peoples, species, and the planet. A noteworthy exclusion here is the work of Christian philosophers such as Richard Swinburne and William Lane Craig, who attempt to make Christian belief appear more palatable to rationalists.

Dowley's *Introduction to the History of Christianity* fails to discuss at depth – or even mention – challenging topics such as child abuse, the crimes of the Inquisitions and Christian colonialists, the Salem witch trials, and the persecutions of Freemasons. It is poorly referenced, unscholarly, and certainly is not objective. As such, it is of very limited use to those wishing to dispassionately describe, explain, and evaluate various aspects of the Christian faith.

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